Report   **05.456**
Date   26 August 2005
File   PK/02/02/02

Committee   **Landcare**
Author   **Amanda Cox Principal Advisor - Marketing &
                   Design**

Visitor monitoring programme

1.   Purpose

To report on the new Visitor Monitoring Programme (VMP) for the regional parks and forests.

2.   Significance of the decision

The matters in this report do not trigger the significance policy of the Council or otherwise trigger section 76(3)(b) of the Local Government Act 2002.

3.   Background

Over the last 12 months, Parks and Forests has been reviewing its means of gathering information about who is (and is not) using the parks, what park users are doing when they are there, and why they like the parks and forest areas.

Like other park providers, we need to have solid empirical evidence of the value of parks as significant community assets. This was recognised in the 2003-2013 LTCCP process, during which Council allocated $30,000 in 2005 and 2006 to market research in the parks and forest areas.

During the process of this review, it has become clear that there are no easy answers when trying to develop a foolproof system of gathering and extrapolating park user data. This is an inherent problem in the industry. Large land holdings and multiple entry points in GWRC's parks and forest areas makes gathering 100% accurate data impossible, meaning we will have to rely on statistical "checks and balances" to make sure that information gathered is reliable enough to be useable.

Some of the methodology and techniques used to gather data in the past have had limited reliability. When developing the new VMP, a lot of our emphasis was on identifying key issues that can limit the usefulness of the data collected,

and, given that we were never going to gather 100% accurate data, assessing what level of error in the information we were comfortable with.

4. The new Visitor Monitoring Programme

During 2004 Tourism Resource Consultants (TRC) was asked to assist Parks & Forests in developing a visitor monitoring framework that will keep us in touch with community expectations, and provide impartial and robust information on which Council can base key decisions. At a park level, information such as satisfaction with facilities, changes in visitation patterns and levels, and possible conflicts between users will help us deliver quality facilities and settings. Looking to the future, the parks' current and potential contribution to Quality for Life can be regularly reviewed through surveys, focus groups and observation.

4.1 Key elements of the VMP

TRC helped identify some key elements that were essential for a new VMP:

- **Several research tools** will be needed to provide checks and balances so that we can be confident in the findings. Relying on one research tool leaves too higher risk of data inaccuracy. Tools will include an on-park visitor satisfaction survey; a wider general population survey (conducted by phone); focus group surveys; self administered feedback forms; observation and feedback from rangers and other staff.

- **"On park" and "off park", qualitative and quantitative tools**. This will enable us to both test the significance of various factors (e.g. awareness, visitation, and need for upgrades) and explore issues in more depth (e.g. barriers to visiting). They will also help to gauge the use of parks by visitors to the region.

- A new **model for counting park <u>visits</u>** using a combination of calibrated track and road counters. This is not to be confused with park visitors – many people visit more than once in a specified period.

4.2 What's happening now?

In May 2005 we commissioned one aspect of the VMP, the general population survey, in conjunction with Emergency Management. Overall results indicated a generally high level of satisfaction with the parks. However awareness and visitation are increasing slowly.

This year we plan to implement the first stage of the model for counting visits, by recalibrating track and road counters in Belmont Regional Park. This exercise will identify the entrances that attract 75% of the visits to the park (a figure which will be extrapolated across the park) and calibrate the counters correctly. We will also pilot our on-park visitor satisfaction surveys.

We have purchased nine new track counters to be installed at every entrance (except Horokiri Rd) for a trial period (some of these will be relocated to other parks following this trial). Two new vehicle counters will be installed at the

Hill Road and Dry Creek entrances, attached to the automatic gates. We will be hiring several temporary staff for set days over the summer to physically count the visits and interview park visitors.

We are also planning another general population survey and to develop self administered feedback "freepost" cards, to be available at the parks.

These activities are provided for in the current marketing budget.

4.2.1 What about the other parks?

Counters for all the other parks need to be installed and/or recalibrated. However the other parks do not involve as much work as Belmont Regional Park e.g. Battle Hill and Kaitoke Regional Parks. We will complete the recalibration projects in those parks as soon as budget allows.

5. Communication

With this project Parks & Forests has a good opportunity to demonstrate leadership in an important area of parks management; that of park user research. We intend to communicate that with local and regional residents through *Green Shoots* newsletter, *Elements* and press releases. Our experiences in implementing the project should also be of interest to other parks bodies such as the *Parks Forum* and the *NZ Recreation Association*.

6. Recommendations

That the Committee:

1. **Receives** *the report.*

2. **Notes** *the content of the report.*

Report prepared by: Report approved by:

Amanda Cox   **Murray Waititi**
Principal Advisor - Marketing   Manager - Parks & Forests
& Design